AUDIENCE, WORDS, AND ART

Studies in Seventeenth-Century French Rhetoric

HUGH M. DAVIDSON
In the six studies which make up this volume, Mr. Davidson has sought to do four things: (1) to recover the crucial steps in the attempt to reconstitute rhetoric as a discipline for France and the French language in the seventeenth century; (2) to analyze the opposition to that attempt, as it appears in the Logique of Port-Royal; (3) to show how Pascal, starting from principles like those of the Port-Royalists, invented an art of persuasion which is reflected in the Lettres provinciales, especially, but also in the Pensées; and (4) to compare and contrast the ways in which one theme or factor in rhetorical theory — the audience — becomes specified in the minds of Corneille, Racine, and Molière as they write and defend their dramatic works.

In the adventures of rhetoric in seventeenth-century France, the historian of ideas and methods uncovers the results of a persistent effort to renew and rebuild one of the great intellectual techniques invented by the ancients, and to do so in face of attacks from expert controversi­lists for whom the future belonged to logic. The historian of literature finds in the documents principles of interest to him, for they make it possible to see in criticism now three centuries old signs of life and coherence instead of a curious taste for arbitrary pronouncements. They open to him, moreover, an important factor in some of the great creative minds of the century. In several ways and degrees this rhetorical discipline was actualized in the energies of Pascal, Corneille, Racine, and Molière. That it played a part in their ways of stating and solving their problems is no doubt one of the surest signs of its lasting power and greatness.

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To L. and A.